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Subject: [WQ News] Fracking Needs Rules, Not Flawed Studies

[Hotspot](#)
[decision](#)
[public health](#)
[Joseph Martens](#)
[skin in the game](#)
[Robert Howarth](#)
[Anthony Ingraffea](#)
[paper](#)
[carbon emissions](#)
[Park Foundation](#)
[Lawrence Cathles](#)
[study](#)
[Bloomberg News](#)
[University of Texas](#)
[Texas](#)
[Pennsylvania State University](#)
[State University of New York](#)
[studies](#)
[Andrew Cuomo](#)
[environmental groups](#)
[health commissioner](#)
[Colorado](#)
[health impact assessment](#)
[linked](#)
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[New York](#)
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Fracking Needs Rules, Not Flawed Studies

By the Editors - Oct 21, 2012

New York officials have again put off a decision on whether to allow hydraulic fracturing in the shale-gas-rich state, saying more research is needed to determine the public health effects.

It's wise to ensure that fracking -- which enables the extraction of gas and oil trapped underground -- doesn't pose unnecessary social, economic or health risks. Unfortunately, much of the research to date has been tainted by conflicts of interest -- real and imagined -- that have colored findings to provide ammunition for supporters or opponents.

Can one more study provide unquestionable evidence that fracking is safe? It's doubtful. Already environmental groups are agitating over New York Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joseph Martens's rejection of an independent health study in favor of one done by the state's health commissioner.

Rather than wait for absolution, policy makers should allow drilling to proceed under strict regulation and supervision. The risks posed by fracking -- already well-enough known -- can be addressed by crafting tough rules governing well construction, wastewater treatment and chemical disclosure.

Anyone looking for concrete evidence of fracking's impact will probably come away confused by the conflicting research. One can find studies linking fracking with water contamination and others concluding there is zero evidence. An oft-cited Cornell University study depicts natural gas as dirtier than coal, while other peer-reviewed studies find the opposite. Economic studies are similarly polarized, detailing both huge employment and revenue gains from drilling and large economic costs from pollution, infrastructure strain and plunging real-estate values.

One constant is that much of the research is funded by those with skin in the game -- oil and gas interests on one hand and environmental groups on the other. While that doesn't necessarily delegitimize the findings, it does undermine people's trust in them. Some of the science has been found lacking.

Sponsored Research

In 2011, Cornell University Professors Robert Howarth and Anthony Ingraffea upended the environmental world with a paper, published in *Climatic Change Letters*, declaring that natural gas, far from being a "clean" fuel, contributes to global warming even more than coal. The researchers based their conclusions largely on estimates of how much methane escapes from natural gas operations over 20 years, compared with carbon emissions from coal. The study was funded in part with a \$35,000 grant from the Park Foundation, an environmental advocacy group that has spent more than \$1.5 million on efforts researching and opposing natural gas drilling.

A year later, another Cornell professor, Lawrence Cathles, published a study debunking his colleagues' work. Cathles called Howarth and Ingraffea's estimate of methane leakage "impossible" and said the 20-year time frame skewed the results. While methane is a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, it leaves the atmosphere more quickly than CO₂, which can persist for centuries.

Proponents of fracking have funded studies that arrive at favorable conclusions yet don't reveal industry sponsorship. As Bloomberg News reported, a February study by a University of Texas professor found no evidence of groundwater contamination from fracking but failed to disclose that the author sat on the board of a gas-producing company with fracking operations in Texas, for which he received more than \$400,000 in compensation. Academics at Pennsylvania State University and the State University of New York at Buffalo have also produced fracking-friendly reports and failed to disclose industry ties.

Disputed Findings

New York has already produced two environmental impact studies on fracking of its own, and elicited more than 80,000 comments on them. Now, Governor Andrew Cuomo's administration is bowing to environmental groups who say another study is needed to assess potential public-health impacts. Joseph Martens handed the job to New York's health commissioner, saying it would be almost impossible to find outside experts with no conflict of interest.

If history is any guide, rather than provide greater clarity, New York's study will be picked apart by those who disagree with the findings. That's what happened in Garfield County, Colorado, where a health impact assessment by the Colorado School of Public Health was abandoned after the oil and gas industry attacked its findings. Similarly last year, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency linked fracking with water contamination in Pavillion, Wyoming, the oil and gas industry and Wyoming officials questioned the federal agency's methods and interpretations, prompting a retest by EPA and the U.S. Geological Survey. (Last month, the USGS released findings largely mirroring EPA's original ones.)

Perhaps New York's aim is to research fracking to death, ensuring it never comes into practice. We hope that's not the case. A moratorium on drilling in place since 2010 has already cost the state jobs and tax revenue.

It doesn't take a scientist to recognize that pumping chemicals underground to extract methane can pose risks. But there is little hard evidence to date that fracking, when done appropriately and safely, has a deleterious effect. Policy makers should look to science not to let them delay fracking but to help them craft strict regulations to prevent problems.

New York should make use of the existing public-health research to expedite its review and meet its previously scheduled -- and now unlikely -- Nov. 29 deadline for a fracking decision and move swiftly to implement tough regulations. Granted, low natural-gas prices and a shift to oil production have somewhat damped the shale-gas drilling boom, giving New York some breathing room. Yet it will take time to craft rules and solicit public input, and the state should not unnecessarily delay its decision.

Even more important than a single state's effort is the need for uniformity, and that means the federal government should step in and craft regulations for well casing and construction, which would ensure energy companies adhere to the same standards across the U.S. and prevent leaks that can contaminate groundwater.

Regulators should also require that companies disclose every ingredient in their fracking fluids, capture air emissions from fracking operations and handle wastewater responsibly to prevent toxic chemicals from spilling, leaching or evaporating.

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